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**ABSTRACT**

A method for inactivating pathogens is provided. This method generally comprises the application of an effective amount of inhibitory compounds, preferably as a topical formulation, either alone or in combination with a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier or diluent. The inhibitory compounds include a copolymer of maleic acid and styrenesulfonic acid, polyvinyl phthalate sulphate, and their salts. The method can be used for preventing transmission and infection of sexual transmitted diseases, for treating and preventing bacterial vaginitis, and as a contraceptive method. These contraceptives generally have fewer side effects than conventional vaginal contraceptives (e.g., Nonoxynol-9). For example, the compounds useful in the methods of the invention not only are not toxic to natural and beneficial flora and, thus, do not upset the local microbiological balance, but also help maintain a low pH in the vaginal environment.